On State, Society and Discourse in India

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The colonial period saw the appearance of two types of divisions in Indian society. The first was a division between those who made the world they inhabited intelligible in terms of modernist discourse and those who did not. This division ran decisively between the Indian elite and the lower orders. On top of it, however, nationalism put in place a second political division between colonialism and the Indian nation. I consider Gandhi's discourse or rather his discursive position to be of crucial importance. This is not because he created a discourse of inexhaustible originality, as some argue. But his kind of discourse managed to bridge the gulf between the lower orders and the elite and to keep the values, objectives and conceptions of the world of the two sides intelligible to each other.

The Indian national movement did not produce an inevitable Nehruvian result. The way in which Nehru was able to shape the ideals of the Indian state after independence was partly a result of some fortuitous circumstances. No logic of the previous movements, no wave made it necessary for the Nehruvian elite to come to power, but there was something deeper which went in favour of this modernist dominance at the time of independence. He enjoyed a silent but subtle and massively significant cultural approval of the modern elite. Members of this class, dispersed thinly but crucially throughout the governmental and modern sectors, approved spontaneously the assumption of power by a rationalist 'philosopher king' — though some of them knew that he might incline towards a statist radicalism common in the forties and fifties. However, this did not represent a serious discontinuity at the level of discourse. Entrepreneurial groups and politicians favouring the propertied classes knew that they would have differences with Nehru, on socialism, the state sector, redistribution, foreign policy, land reforms, the state's power to take away property, etc. But these were comprehensible differences, differences of political ideology among those who inhabited the same social discourse. Political disagreement is of course a form of successful communication.

A paradox of mobilisation made this early period of political construction in India relatively easy. If the divergent types of political discourse, with what they considered to be politically rational, their incommensurable ideals, had simultaneously found utterance in Indian political life, it might have been exceedingly difficult to carry on institutional formation. But the backwash of mobilisation of the national movement ensured an implicit trust of the masses in the initiatives of their leaders. Thus these various conflicting discourses were not brought immediately into dialogue on equal terms. During the nationalist struggle there had occasionally been distinct initiatives from the lower orders, when political space was opened up within the national movement. But recent historical research has also shown how quickly the main Congress leadership was able to shut off such space, or bring their movements under control. Thus the support that the Congress leadership received was not of the kind that the bourgeoisie in classical bourgeois revolutions of the west created for themselves, by reconstituting through a process of prior cultural movement a hegemony and directive preeminence for themselves. Ordinary people were mobilised in the Indian national movement in tremendous numbers, but not by creating hegemony of this kind. At the same time, as the failure of the communist moves towards insurgency indicated, the subaltern groups were not ready to break with the bourgeois nationalist leadership, or prepared to take large world-constructing actions on their own.

This had several consequences. First, of course, the setting up of political institutions passed off relatively peacefully; the Constituent Assembly, though strangely unrepresentative, still represented a sufficient consensus of the organised groups to bring off a constitution which was not seriously contested. At the same time, internal realignments within the Congress led to serious political decisions. The systematic exodus of the socialist left from the Congress weakened Nehru considerably inside the party that he formally commanded, but the death of Patel also left his own personal eminence uncontested. He was therefore free to pursue a set of policies for which his party colleagues would not have been wholly enthusiastic. The construction he placed on secularism for instance was clearly resented by a section of Congress leaders. His drive for redistributive policies of land reforms met with serious, if undeclared hostility from his own party's lower level leadership. Most Congress leaders would have been more lukewarm than Nehru in developing friendly relations with the Soviet Union, and would not have understood in a clear theoretical form the logic of the

massive heavy industrialisation drive that he pursued through the second five year plan. This shows in a sense a miraculous contingency of some of the central segments of the fairly impressive institutional structure that Congress under Nehru built up. But precisely because of his relative isolation within his own party, Nehru undertook another initiative which has seemed over the long run to overshadow other parts of his institutional strategy.

Nehru began to create an alternative apparatus in the bureaucracy. Planning on a large scale, from 1956 onwards, made for a great extension of an economic bureaucracy inside the government. As the rhetoric of social justice and redistribution increased, this bureaucracy expanded rapidly. This differed from classical European bourgeois revolutions, where capitalism first emerged in initiatives and in institutions within civil society, and the state was later used as an instrument to correct its spontaneous production of inequality. In India, there was no developed civil society and many of capitalism's classical initiatives within civil society were undertaken by the state.[1] The most serious consequence of this of course was that the state became omnipresent, since it was performing functions left to the institutions of civil society, and it was impossible to abjure transactions with this state. At the same time, it could only work through the techniques of an unreconstructed colonialist bureaucratic style, wholly monological, criminally wasteful, utterly irresponsible and unresponsive to public sensitivity. Those after power would want to get into its seats, completely screened as they appeared to be from accountability, and those who could not get into them would become increasingly alienated.

The manner and structure of capitalist growth accentuated such differences. Instead of reducing regional inequalities, capitalism intensified them and tended to concentrate opportunities and resources in centres of political power. The cultural consequences of this process have not been analysed carefully until recently. Over the long term, the strategy of development in India, precisely through its relative successes, has tended to reopen the deep division of discourse in Indian society, between a homogenising elite speaking English, the esperanto of the upper orders, and a vast lower order population looking and speaking with an intense vernacular hostility against some of the consequences of this form of capitalist development.

The Nature of Indian Nationalism

From this point of view it appears justified to say with Rajni Kothari[2] that the first phase of Indian politics was built on a kind of consensus, but he seems to have misjudged the nature of the consensus he identified, and its possibilities. It was of course an elite consensus, which passed uncontested because of its nearness to the mobilisation of the national movement, and the relation of implicit trust between its leadership and the masses. It was a consensus of discourse, rather than of ideological positions. The institutional pattern that Nehru wished to put in place came up against serious ideological criticism from the left, especially the socialists and the communists. But there *was* still a commonality at a different level: they had very different things to say about the political world, its structure, purposes, ideals, but they shared a common way of arguing about these things. This seemed to create real divisions among them, which was what they primarily saw. But this also created underlying unities among them when looked at from outside this discourse, which is what must have impressed the other classes and groups in Indian society. The constitutional frame that was adopted, though it was exhaustingly detailed (and therefore a lawyers' constitution rather than a citizens'), still was silent and vague on various questions. And although the ideological conflicts in the Constituent Assembly went in favour of a more conservative reading of the Congress programme, the Nehru regime took significant steps immediately afterwards to counteract this in actual policy. The Planning Commission, soon to become the actual centre of economic policy making, remained outside the formal constitutional framework. Initially, the federal structure worked through the federalism inside the Congress Party rather than constitutional channels. The regime of rights centred on the individual subject, made legal concessions to minority rights which could be enjoyed only as members of communities, rather than as bourgeois individuals. But despite these underlying problems which took some time to break out into the open, the achievements of the Nehru regime were massive by any standards. True, some of this was fortuitous, and caused by the fortunate overdetermination at the time of freedom. But one can clearly see that given a slightly different turn of events, India could have had a very different set of foundational policies, and these most likely would have been more retrograde.

It was in the economic sphere that Nehru's policies have enjoyed the greatest long term success, though at the start his government seemed often on the point of being overwhelmed by financial and resource difficulties. By the time he became prime minister, Nehru had moved away from his 'scientific socialist' beliefs, though importantly he would still have characterised his beliefs as scientific. From his point of view, he moved away from that doctrine because it was not scientific. He had given up that construction of socialism, but he had not given up science. Still, his

[1] I have advanced an argument of this kind in 'A Critique of the Passive Revolution', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, (March, 1989).

[2] R. Kothari, *Political in India* (Boston, 1970).

commitment to a British Labour version of social democracy made him interfere with what others would have considered the more 'natural' course of capitalist growth. Indeed, Nehru's certainties were shaped by and shared with the emerging discourses of social theory, soon to be inscribed on the whole world in the form of reformist Keynesian economism in all sectors of public policy. The economic growth of society was predicated on the building of the industrial sector. In this, heavy capital goods industries took precedence and since these could not be built by private capital, this led to the steady growth of a large public sector with strong links to ministerial bureaucracies.[3] In this milieu, it was subtly misleading to speak in the language of the interventionist state, and to transfer, implicitly, a whole set of expectations from the European case because that was a language on which the history of European capitalism was inscribed quite clearly. In Europe, the state did 'intervene' in a society whose basic structures had been formed earlier by civil society, and the existence of a strong civil society made the state act in responsible ways. In India, where there was no prior civil society, one could hardly talk of an interventionist state since many of those institutions were brought into existence by the state. Therefore, in a subtle but significant way, the direction of the descriptive language and justificatory rhetoric was wrong.

Some of the problems of this kind of economic planning have long been noted. Even economists who favour the state sector and its leading role agree that the planning models probably neglected the question of agriculture. Not surprisingly, the Nehru regime faced both economic and political difficulties arising out of food shortages during the late fifties. The theoretical fault in all this was that the regime worked, along with all others thinking about development at the time, irrespective of ideological positions, with a heavily reductive economistic theory of social change. Economic arguments tended to be aggressively ahistorical. Everything else was turned into problems to which economic policies had the solutions. The sequence in which the sectors had emerged, their specific institutional forms, how the historical sequence of their emergence could have affected their institutional logic — such questions were seldom asked. There is a minor irony in this since much of this discussion was analysed by Marxism, and Marxism in its classical form at least is deeply sensitive to sequences and trajectories.

Second, the bureaucratisation of social life, in the absence of the structures of civil society, created difficulties. But the effects of these politics on the discursive map of Indian society were interesting, and have not been carefully analysed. The structure of Nehruvian democracy was raised on an anomalous base. It did represent, as some of its admirers put it, the greatest experiment with democracy in the history of the world, but that was possible partly because the large masses on whom these rights were conferred found them too unfamiliar at first for immediate use. Planning was aimed not only at the construction of a wide industrial base, but also at reduction of some of the gross inequalities in incomes. Nehru certainly saw an alleviation of poverty as a condition for genuine democracy, but it depended increasingly on the monologic instruments of the state and its bureaucracy rather than dialogical, movement-like forms. The falling apart of the Gandhian language in Indian politics, which had reduced for a time the hostile unfamiliarity between elite and subaltern political semiotics, contributed to this widening gap, accentuating the divergence between populist government policies and popular consciousness. And the discourse of the elite tended to turn increasingly inwards in two senses. First, the debates were directed at the intelligibility and justifiability in terms of the political stances of the high discourse, leaving the task of formation of a vernacular, popular discourse around these questions to an unmindful educational policy. Second, there was a further tendency in later years to withdraw issues of development from public arenas of discussion and to surrender it to so-called expert groups, creating a sort of elite confidentiality around the vital decisions about politics and society.

It must be acknowledged that Nehru personally was conscious of this withdrawal, and sought to continue to publicise the development debate. But it was not a matter so much of personal predilections of leaders, but a tendency of the structure of development strategy. Indian democracy remained vibrant, with occasional mass movements being able to register their demands on the state, as with the regional autonomy movements of the fifties, and the food movements some years later. So the enormous extension of the state was not coercive, but remained external. The elite around Nehru were sensitive about retaining democratic forms and pursuing, within what they considered to be reasonable limits, the reformist aspirations of the state. But they did not see the problem of its externality. In retrospect, its basic failure seems to have been the almost total neglect of the question of the cultural reproduction of society. It did not try deliberately to create or reconstitute popular commonsense about the political world, taking the new conceptual vocabulary of rights, institutions, impersonal power into the vernacular everyday discourses of rural or small town Indian society.

Thus, unnoticed by the bustling technocracy of the modern sector, the transient links across the political and discursive divide tended to give way. The

[3] For a detailed historical argument, rich in empirical detail, F. Frankel, *India's Political Economy* (Princeton, 1977).

independent Indian state followed a programme of modernity which did not seek to be grounded in the political vocabulary of the nation, or at least its major part. As a result, precisely those ideals — of a modern nationalism, industrial modernity, secular state, democracy and minority rights — came in the long run to appear not as institutions won by a common national movement, but as ideals intelligible to and pursued by the modern elite which inherited power from the British. More than that: subtle and interesting things began to happen to this logic of 'modernisation' which have gone unnoticed. Precisely because the state continued to expand, precisely because it went in a frenetic search of alibis to control ever larger areas of social life, it had to find its personnel, especially at lower levels, from groups who did not inhabit the modernist discourse. Thus it is wrong to believe that the Indian state or its massive bureaucracy is a huge Weberian organisation binding the relaxed, fuzzy, slow-moving society in an iron structure. What has actually been happening is more complex. By overstretching, the state has been forced to recruit personnel from the groups who speak and interpret the world in terms of the other discourse. Since major government policies have their final point of implementation very low down in the bureaucracy, they are reinterpreted beyond recognition.

As a result of its uncontrolled growth, the policies of the state have also lost some of their cohesion. If one does not have a purely romantic view of the Indian past, one can see the direction this reinterpretation of government policies, this utilisation of internal space for lower level initiative would take. It is not surprising that arguments of social justice are often used as an unanswered justification for the encouragement of nepotism and corruption. Indeed, there is very little corruption in India that is not done for high moral principles. The actual conduct of those in authority has also tended in recent years to slide backwards towards a more historically 'familiar' style of irresponsible power, with the withdrawal of significant decisions, under various excuses, from the arenas of public criticism and responsibility. It must be seen, while debating the effects and justification of modernity, that these trends come straight out of India's glorious past.

However, the point here is not to tell the story of Indian politics, or to present a convincing periodisation. In the accepted ways of standard social science the story has been told many times over. Indeed, my point is that despite those familiar narratives of the achievements and failures of Indian democratic institutions, there is another story to be told. This seems to be sketchily glimpsed by recent observers of Indian politics, but no one seems to know what the story is about. I am quite clear that this ambiguity is reflected in the curious way I have just presented the problem. I think it can be sorted out in a preliminary way by using the distinction between political ideology and structures of discourse, and acknowledging that the classifications that can be produced by their different criteria look quite different. I should like to look at some of these diagnoses of the recent problems of the Indian state, and move our discussion towards some theoretical conclusions.

Political Diagnoses

One of the punctuations generally observed in Indian politics is the spectacular difference between the Nehru period, which ended in 1964, and the later one. I have argued elsewhere that there is a further division: the electoral instability of governments in the period after the fourth general elections in 1967 has since been changed into a more serious and frightening uncertainty about the state form itself. On the one side the political behaviour of party leaders and managers seem to discredit the institutions of democracy; on the other, sometimes popular anger against such political games has assumed a form in which it seems that it might pass into a vote of no confidence on the state form itself.

What has been the historical record of this complex of institutions? This question has been discussed so often that there are only some of its implications which need to be assessed. But we must also keep in view the standard and fairly reasonable defence by Nehru's followers (in ideas, not in party affiliation: indeed, the Congress Party under later leaders has been the main destroyer of the institutional logic that Nehru sought to make safe) that forty years is too short a span for institutions to take root or to adapt themselves to a very different historical milieu. But even in the short term, its achievements are not negligible. Unlike in most other Third World states, a formal democratic constitution was not initially adopted to be dropped soon after in favour of dictatorial authority. In fact, the way the emergency ended in India showed the great ideological depth of the democratic idea. Mrs Gandhi believed that even the record of the emergency regime had to be electorally justified. Often, however, other achievements of the Nehruvian model are clouded in a discussion either of pure economic growth, in which dictatorial regimes accepting subordinate productive roles in the international capitalist system are shown to be remarkably superior to India's record in growth rates, or of radical theories based on strategic ignorance, which show the distributive advantages of a communist economy. But industrialisation in India, though wasteful in many ways, has a wide base. And the institutional form of the economy has ensured that its political sovereignty has not been renegotiated through extreme economic pressure. All these relative achievements are undeniable, but this shows the present predicament of

the Indian state in a curious light. For the state is not threatened by forces from outside. On the contrary, most powers acknowledge its resilience and regional dominance. But it appears threatened from inside. Its difficulties arise not because its performance was bad, but rather from what its rulers would no doubt consider among its modest achievements. And most remarkably, the institutional forms that the early nationalist leadership created for the benefit and well being of the common people seems to have come under pressure as more common people have entered into party politics.

This then is the basic form of the paradox of democracy in India. It is undoubtedly true that some of Indira Gandhi's electoral moves, and the rhetoric consistently used by all political parties — of popular participation, realisation of rights, eradication of poverty — have led to a greater political articulateness of the ordinary people. To that extent, high politics, even in the spectacular arenas, which were earlier preserves of the modernist elite are coming under pressure from the alphabet of the lower discourse. It seems, however, that the more ordinary people have written their minds into the format of politics, the greater the pressure or threat on democratic structures as generally understood in terms of western precedents. There seems to be some incompatibility between the institutional logic of democratic forms and the logic of popular mobilisation. The more one part of the democratic ideal is realised the more the other part is undermined. The paradox, as T. N. Madan recently[4] put it is that if Indian politics become genuinely democratic in the sense of coming into line with what the majority of ordinary Indians would consider reasonable, they will become less democratic in the sense of conforming to the principles of a secular, democratic state acceptable to the early nationalist elite. What seems to have begun in Indian politics is a conflict over intelligibility, a writing of the political world that is more fundamental than traditional ideological disputes. It appears that the difference between the two discourses is reappearing, now that the lower discourse is asserting itself and making itself heard precisely through the opportunities created by the upper one. The way it rewrites the political world might not be liked by the ruling modernist elites, but it is too late to disenfranchise them.

This is an interesting and challenging line of thought, and very different from earlier diagnoses of political difficulties in India. Earlier, social scientists usually began by expressing solidarity with the project of introducing modernity, equating the modernity with a re-enactment of the European drama. (Indeed, there was no Asian drama to stage at all. What occurred in India was merely the Asian premier of the European narrative, luckily with an appropriately cultivated cast). They expressed irritation or puzzlement at the obduracy with which society seemed to resist it, and such resistance was generally accounted for through some simple, malignant form of direct political agency — corruption, lack of political will, etc. The explanation that I am proposing seeks a less agency-oriented answer to the difficulties, and is prepared to be puzzled by deeper questions, and is ready to turn the questions around towards social science itself. From this perspective, the equation is to be arranged not between a rational programme prepared by the elite and carried out by an instrumentally viewed state on the one hand, and a resisting, irrational society, but the other way around. Indian politicians of the Nehru type made a mistake very similar to the one that has now been, a trifle theatrically, traced through the entire history of social science. Western social theory moved from a sort of high orientalism practised by Marx and Weber to a very inadequate theory of modernisation worked out by Parsonian developmentalists, a move often celebrated as from philosophy to science, but in reality from tragedy to farce.

Nothing is more disorienting than when our fundamental taxonomies are turned around and we blink at a world in which things occupy entirely unaccustomed places. This argument tries something like this about development thinking in India. Clearly, many Indian social scientists carried on their earlier debates within a world which was firmly held by the solid homogenising taxonomies established by nationalist beliefs. Most political argument was internal to these boundaries. The emergence of such arguments in serious social theory shows that the pervasiveness, the self evidentiality of the nationalist construction of the world is gradually fraying and disappearing. It has been argued forcefully in recent years, by social scientists like Chatterjee, Nandy and Madan,[5] that the state and the ruling elite uncritically adopted an orientalist, externalist construction of their society and its destiny reflected in the wonderful and tragic symbolism of 'the discovery of India'. Its initiatives were bound to be onesided. To the world of India's lower orders, it simply refused or merely forgot to explain itself. Indeed, to some it would have seemed that the Indian elite was more concerned about justifying its initiatives to external audiences than it its own. Historically, its absentmindedness about cultural unity has driven apart the political diaglossia of the national movement, held together in a sense by the easy bilingualism of its political leaders and cultural intelligentsia. Today, that cultural terrain is increasingly broken into a unilingual English speaking elite, and an equally monolingual conglomerate of regional

[4] T. N. Madan, 'Secularism in its Place', *Journal of Asian Studies* (November, 1987).

[5] P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986); Madan, *ibid.*; and A. Nandy. *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi, 1986).

groups which are losing a dialogical relation not only with the upper strata but between languages as well, leading to greater friction and hostility among regions.

The implications of this critique must be seen clearly. It has brought into question the cognitive, the political and the moral legitimacy of the whole institutional regime constructed after independence. About the whole lot — the impersonal nature of public power, the rule of law, the democratic order, the idea of a complex and composite nation, a secular polity — it asks whether it is legitimate for a relatively small elite to impose their ideals on others who do not necessarily share them. It also asks if this political form, because of its unintelligibility, can be worked by these people. It must be seen that it moves to cognitive questions to radicalise its critique. It must also be clear that these questions are addressed not only to the Indian political or modernist ruling elite, but also to social theory in equal measure — because they can be logically so directed, and also because it is these theories, which the elite believed, that gave them the intellectual justification to do what they had undertaken.

But some of the more general, abstract, epistemic implications of this kind of argument should be noted. In a sense, this sort of theoretical discomfort tries to break from the vulgar pretensions of being a policy science (which posited too direct a relation between social science and government policy) and seeks to return to a more classical conception of political theory, as a kind of historical self-reflection of society. It assumes that one of the tests of good social theory is whether it can relevantly comment on what is happening in society, and contribute to general management of social destiny. It rules out a distancing, reflective attitude to social and political questions. Its own performance must be as subject to this criterion of success as that of the previous theory that it rejects.